A New Progressive Coalition: The European Left in a Time of Change

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Introduction

A decade and half into the new century the prospects for Social Democracy across advanced democracies appear increasingly grim. The twin forces of globalization and technological change, combined with rising income inequality, have simultaneously enhanced economic insecurity and fed into new populist movements, particularly on the right, that undercut left-parties' electoral base. Despite these seeming challenges, across the European Union as a whole, in the last electoral cycle, more than third of voters cast a ballot for a left-wing party, with over 40% of voters doing so in long-standing European democracies. [i] Indeed, while the number of left voters has waxed and waned through the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st century, the left's overall share in the electorate has remained remarkably stable. As Figure 1 shows, around 40% of European voters in democratic countries voted for a party left of center in 1960 and just shy of 40% of voters in these same countries voted for a left party in 2015.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The disjuncture between this headline stability in the left's electoral fortunes and the radical changes in the structure of the economy and political competition draws attention to more dramatic shifts in the underlying social coalitions supporting left-wing parties.

First, in contrast to earlier years, the typical working-age left voter is now a member of the middle class. While both the traditional industrial working class

and new lower-skilled service workers form an important part of the contemporary left's electoral base, professionals, skilled and semi-skilled service workers, and white-collar employees now make up a larger proportion.

Second, a subsection of these middle class voters are relatively stable voters for left-wing parties. Skilled service workers – particularly in social professions – are as likely or more likely to vote for the left and hold economically left views as traditional workers. However, other groups of middle class voters are more centrist in their attitudes and more volatile in their voting patterns.

Third, this partial realignment of the middle class around the left creates a dilemma for left parties. Although new middle class left voters and working class voters both prioritize greater economic redistribution and support for social welfare, this congruence rests on fragile foundations. New middle class voters tend to be far more culturally liberal than traditional working class voters, and this disagreement can put the electoral coalition under threat when social issues like immigration are highly salient and populist alternatives are available. However, moving to the left on economic issues to shore up this base, threatens to alienate more traditional middle class floating voters who are essential for electoral victory.

I conclude with some thoughts on how to navigate these tradeoffs.

A Middle Class Shift?

Scholars of voting behavior debate the continued relevance of class to electoral politics. Most analyses of class distinguish it conceptually from short-term

income, arguing that social class represents a more stable set of relationships in the labor market that underpin individual life chances. John Goldthorpe's influential class schema, for instance, defines class in terms of employment relations (whether an individual is an employee, employer or self-employed) and the precariousness of employment as proxied by occupation.[ii] When applied to politics, the underlying claim is that both the different risks that individuals experience in the labor market and differences in their longer-term income lead to varying economic preferences across classes, shaping voting patterns in stable and predictable ways. Membership in collective organizations, like trade unions, further strengthens these relationships.

Historically, the degree to which social class shaped either preferences or voting behavior varied substantially across countries. In many European countries, religion and language were stronger predictors of vote choice than class. Nonetheless, class differences were present in most contexts, with Social Democratic parties drawing heavily on a working-class base whose interests were aligned with a more extensive welfare state and collective wage bargaining.

As is well known, the changing structure of both the economy and society has altered this relationship. Technological developments, the mass entry of women in the labor force, and expanding global trade, and new form of immigration, have all led to growing heterogeneity in the workforce in terms of both wages and occupations. Over the last four decades, the size of the traditional manual working class has shrunk, as has its organizational presence in trade-unions, alongside a dramatic expansion of employment in both higher skilled and (to a less extent) lower skilled service jobs.[iii]

In this new environment, individuals' economic experiences have become more heterogeneous, leading some to question the relevance of class for both voters' preferences and political behaviors. Indeed, nearly all traditional measures of class voting suggest that it has declined in significance, as both the absolute and relative differences between middle and working class voting patterns have blurred.[iv] Russell Dalton has influentially argued that voters now select parties on issues or the competence of leaders, weakening the relationship between parties and stable social groups.[v] This claim suggests not only that class has less relevance in structuring the political environment, but also that the political environment is less structured in general.

However, despite the conventional interpretation that politics has become more 'classless', others argue that class continues to matter for both preferences and behavior, yet in new ways. Geoff Evans and James Tilley, for instance, argue that in the United Kingdom, there remain differences across classes in preferences, but whether these differences matter for vote choices depends on party competition. They show that Labour party moderation from 1997 allowed the party to pick up centrist middle class voters – blurring class distinctions in voting patterns – but not eliminating the underlying differences. Elsewhere, Evans argues that when one looks broadly at class voting - not just the difference between working and middle class voting – it remains an important structuring force in voting. The challenge is to conceptualize class and its relationship to vote choice in terms that reflect voters' transformed experiences in the labor market.[vi]

What are these transformed experiences? Work by Daniel Oesch and others looks to modify Goldthorpe's original definition of class to reflect labor

market changes.[vii] Oesch expands his class schema to distinguish among a broader range of groups based on their underlying "work logic", with new occupations varying both in the skill base of workers and whether the work involves interaction with people or is more technical or hierarchical.

This work suggests that occupations differ not only in terms of their material dimensions but also the cultural socialization of workers. Collectively, this research predicts – in contrast to earlier studies of post-industrial economic transformations – that many service sector employees are imbued with both economically left and culturally liberal values and that these values matter for their voting behavior[viii]. Put differently, structural changes in the economy have created new social groups drawn to center-left parties, yet, in contrast to the past, these groups tend to be higher-skilled middle-class voters. Far from classless politics, left parties are now drawing on two well-defined class constituencies that cross traditional boundaries.

In order to examine these longer-run trends, Silja Häusermann and I combine multiple waves of the Eurobarometer and European Social Surveys to create a time series of left-party support across Europe.[ix] A number of Eurobarometer surveys, fielded from 1972-2002, asked respondents their vote intention in upcoming elections, while the European Social Survey asks respondents their vote choice in the previous election. Although these questions vary, in practice respondents answer them similarly and in the one-year of overlap between the two surveys the two measures yield similar distributions in party support within countries. Together, these surveys allow us to construct a time series of party choice in eleven European countries from 1978-2014, and in

five additional countries (Austria, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland) from 1995-2014.

Across both surveys, we code respondents' party choice into basic party families, and then collapse these choices into a "Left Support" variable. We score social democrats, communist, left-socialist and green parties as left parties, with liberal, conservative, religious, agrarian, and populist right parties as those on the right. The results hold up whether regional parties or ethnic nationalist parties are included or excluded.

We then create a measure of class drawing on respondents' employment status, education and occupation. The Eurobarometer employs different measures of occupation over time, some of which are more fine-grained than others, but all of which are highly aggregated. Given these constraints, we create a four-part measure, distinguishing employers, middle class, working class, and routine workers. Employers are defined as those working in agriculture and fisheries, self-employed professionals (e.g. lawyers) and owners of shops and business proprietors. Middle class workers include employed professionals, managers, desk workers, white-collar workers, other office employees, and non-office, traveling and sales employees, all with an upper secondary education. Workers include manual workers, skilled manual workers, supervisors, and unskilled workers with upper secondary education. Finally, routine workers are those working in white collar, desk, non-office, traveling and sales, and unskilled jobs without upper secondary education. Education is measured in years in the Eurobarometer. We create nationally specific thresholds for upper secondary education based on the pathways present in the education system.

The European Social Survey (ESS) offers a much more disaggregated occupational measure, using International Standard Classifications of Occupations at the four-digit level (over 100 categories) and a more fine-grained measure of self-employment and number of employees. We use a modified version of Oesch (2016), dividing individuals into 16 class groups. We combine these groups into four aggregate groups to match the Eurobarometer survey. We include large employers, small proprietors, self-employed professionals, and small employers in the employer group. Middle class workers include those in the following occupational groups with upper-secondary education: skilled and semi-skilled socio-cultural professionals (e.g. health professionals, education professionals, care workers), skilled service workers (e.g. hospitality, shop workers), technical experts (e.g. engineers), higher and associate managers (including employed professionals such as lawyers), and skilled office workers (e.g. clerks, accountants). Workers include technicians, skilled crafts workers, and technical-routine workers (e.g. miners, machine operators). Finally, routine workers include service and technical workers without upper-secondary education (e.g. debt collectors, lower-skilled care workers, cleaners). This aggregated categorization allows an overtime examination of broad class groups, while the disaggregated groups allow a more in-depth analysis from 2002-2014 using the ESS only. While some differences across the surveys are irreconcilable, the basic distributions of groups within the two surveys are broadly similar in the one year of overlap.

I begin with a simple descriptive chart of vote choice across social groups. Figure 2 shows the proportion of middle and working class voters selecting left parties. As is well documented in the literature there has been a movement away

from the left by working class voters and towards it by the middle class. Across Europe generally (Figure 2a) and in the UK (Figure 2b), working class voters look more similar to middle class voters in their propensity to vote for the left.

FIGURE 2 HERE

When these changes combine with a numerical decline in the size of the working class, they amount to a radical reconfiguration of the base of left parties. Figure 3a shows the percentage of left-voters across Europe from the middle and working classes (working-age voters) as well as retired voters in the Left base. Figure 3b shows these results for the UK.[x] Among working age adults, we see that the UK looks like the rest of Europe – today most employed voters for left parties are among the middle class. Even when we include retired adults, who may identify more with the traditional working class (data on past occupation is not available), we see that middle class voters are as important and in some contexts a more important component of the left's base.

FIGURE 3 HERE

Together, Figures 2 and 3 suggests that middle class voters are increasingly the central component of the left's electoral base, but it leaves open the question whether these middle class voters represent a fundamental realignment in the social structure or are largely floating voters who happen to vote left.

Who are Middle Class Left Voters? What do they Want?

In order to examine this question in more depth, I return to the European Social Survey (2002-2014). As outlined above, for the ESS I have a more fine-grained measure of class background. Instead of using the aggregate measures, I follow Hausermann and Kriesi (see note 8) in distinguishing 'new' and 'old' middle and working class. The new middle class includes socio-cultural professionals and skilled service workers, whereas the old middle class includes white-collar office workers, managers and technical experts. The new working class includes lower-skilled service and office workers, while the traditional working class includes skilled crafts workers, technicians, and skilled agricultural workers.

In order to find out if these groups behave differently, I start by investigating their voting patterns. Figure 4 examines the proportion of each group voting for a left party, presenting simple group averages. Figure 4 shows that the key middle class group that consistently supports the left is the new middle class. When I conduct regression analysis controlling for age, income, gender, education level and including country and year fixed effects, we see statistically significant differences between the old and the new middle classes in their propensity to vote left (full results available on request).

FIGURE 4 HERE

To see where these choices are coming from, I next turn to differences in basic group preferences on two dimensions: redistribution and immigration. The ESS asks respondents to what extent "The [national] government should take

measures to reduce differences in income levels." Respondents can answer from strongly agree to strongly disagree. I recode this variable into two groups, with strongly agree and agree coded as one and neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree coded as zero.

FIGURE 5 HERE

Figure 5 shows the percentage of each group supporting redistribution across the full 2002-2014. Both across-Europe (5a) and in the UK (5b) we see stable group differences. New middle class voters are more supportive of redistribution than traditional middle class voters – a pattern that holds up over time and across place – and indeed, in some contexts, new middle class voters are on average more supportive of redistribution than the traditional working class. While the new middle classes are statistically indistinguishable from the new and old working class in their support for redistribution, they are, pooled across countries and time, nearly 9% more likely than the old middle classes to support redistribution (controlling for the above-mentioned variables).

When it comes to immigration, we see a different pattern. The ESS asks respondents to assess whether immigration has been bad or good for the economy, on a 10 point scale range from 1=bad to 10=good. While this question is not policy oriented, it nonetheless taps into respondents' support for immigration. To ease interpretation, I rescale the measure so that supporters of immigration (scores 6-10) are coded as 1, and those negative to neutral (1-5) as 0 (the original scale shows similar patterns). Figure 6 presents the results. Here we see that the new and old middle classes are indistinguishable, whereas the

new and old working classes are much less positive towards immigration. These results hold up in the statistical analysis, and after controlling for the above-mentioned variables, on average, the new middle classes are 13% more likely to be positive towards migration than the traditional working class.

FIGURE 6 HERE

There are three major implications of the above analysis. First, as found in other work (see note 8), this analysis shows that new class groups do have stable differences in preferences.

Second, new middle class voters appear to support the more redistributive economic ideologies of left parties, but they are also much more supportive of immigration than the traditional working class. This pattern suggests a potentially uneasy alliance among the two classes bases of left support when cultural issues around immigration are politicized.

Finally, both the regression and descriptive analysis also show much within group variation. This variation suggests that while there are stable group differences, in reality, there is much 'noise' in political choices. Indeed, at any given moment, traditional middle class voters (the "old middle class") are also an important component of left-support even if in a social-structural sense these voters are less aligned to the left. Together, these findings suggest that there are stable differences in class groups that hold up over time and across country in left support, but that these groups alone are unlikely to win elections, as in the past, left parties also need to draw on less aligned middle class voters as well.

A sustainable coalition into the future?

The above analysis showed a dual reorientation at the heart of Left parties towards middle class voters. First, the Left relies increasingly on new middle class voters that are more economically left than previous middle class voters. This group of voters constitutes a potentially strong long-term constituency for left parties in alignment with its traditional working-class base, yet when in comes to immigration (or, as other work shows, cultural issues more broadly), there are rifts between these traditional and new left constituents. Second, even where the working-new middle class alignment holds, left parties still must attract other middle class voters as well. This outcome raises two questions. First, is a coalition between working and new middle class voters sustainable? Second, can a successful platform that draws in additional voters emerge from this coalition? I take these questions in turn.

Although it is outside the remit of this short paper to analyze the sustainability of electoral coalitions broadly, it is worth pointing to some potential fissures in it. Up to this point, I have spoken about parties as large aggregate blocs – the Left and the non-Left. However, over time, many of the shifts in electoral competition have occurred within these blocs, with mainstream Social Democrats facing competition not only from right of center parties but other left parties. These dynamics create two major pressures on mainstream left parties.

First, new middle class voters often have options within the Left. Second, working class voters increasingly also have populist alternatives (on the left, but more frequently on the far-right) to left parties. Figure 7 shows that both groups

often exercise these choices. Figure 7 disaggregates the vote for the mainstream social democratic party in each European country (e.g. Labour in the UK, the SPD in Germany) from the total left vote. We see that the fit between social democratic voting and left voting is tighter for working class voters than middle class voters. Put differently, middle class voters on the left are more willing to cast a green or left-socialist ballot. Figure 7 also shows, by contrast, that working class voters are more willing to vote right-populist than middle class voters. Across the EU-15 sample as a whole in the 2012-2014 ESS waves, nearly 15% of working class respondents said they supported right-populist parties. Given these alternatives, mainstream left parties may face difficulties drawing together working class and new middle class voters in elections where cultural issues are dominant and voters have other options.

This claim brings us to the final question, given a broader congruence between the economic preferences of the new middle classes and traditional working class, is economic polarization an effective strategy for shoring up the electoral constituency? It is out of the scope of this paper to fully analyze the electoral strategies of left parties, and the effectiveness of such strategies are likely to vary across electoral systems. Across Europe as a whole left-parties' actual electoral outcomes are strongly linked to both their ability to mobilize pro-redistribution voters and gain support from more conservative voters.

In some contexts, like the UK, however, there may be tradeoff. I conclude with a brief analysis of the UK using the British Social Attitudes data (1983-2014).[xi] The BSA has regularly asked respondents a range of questions about redistributive attitudes, with the British public becoming increasingly conservative on redistributive questions, particularly those involving support for

the poor over time (albeit with a swing back to more left views from 2010). I divide respondents into two groups based on redistributive attitudes. Those who are pro-redistribution respond to a question asking "should government redistribute income" with a strongly agree or agree, while anti-redistribution respondents are those that neither agree nor disagree, and those that disagree or strongly disagree. The BSA also asks about identification with political parties. I look at what percentage of each redistributive group identifies with Labour. Figure 8 presents the results.

FIGURE 8 HERE

What Figure 8 shows is that Labour's electoral fortunes have relied less on shoring up support among pro-redistribution voters than gaining among anti-redistribution voters. Through the late 1990s and early 2000s, Labour support was depolarized along economic preference lines (see also the aforementioned Tilley and Evans), as Labour moved more to the center ground. In a two party system, particularly in first-past-the-post electoral systems (which are correlated with more electoral success for right-parties) economic polarization is likely to favor conservative rather than left voters, even if it shores up the left's economic base. The reasons for this claim are varied (see, Iversen and Soskice for a comprehensive statement)[xii], but ultimately come back to an electoral dependence on floating middle class voters who are likely to be more risk averse on questions of the economy.

Do these patterns explain the Brexit vote?

The above analysis suggested that the underlying coalition of new middle class and working class voters left voters have constituted an uneasy alliance on

cultural issues and immigration. One implication of this uneasy alliance is that electoral contexts revolving around immigration and cultural issues could lead to fragmentation in the left base. The British referendum on EU membership held in June of 2016 was such an election.

In terms of aggregate returns, locations with more 'new middle class' and traditional middle class voters, such as inner London, tended to vote more heavily to remain in the European Union than traditional working class regions of the country. In order to further investigate this pattern, I turn to the British election study internet panel conducted May-June 2016. The BES panel is a regular survey of 30000 respondents on their attitudes towards a range of issues, including leaving the EU. Unfortunately, the occupation codes for the full May-June panel are not available, but I am able to match about half of respondents to panel wave 6, which has detailed SOC 2010 occupation codes (which I convert to ISCO codes and class groups following the above mentioned technique).[xiii] This approach could yield a slightly unrepresentative sample because it includes only those who have remained in the panel over a year, but when using the panel weights the overall distribution looks similar to the full sample.

Figure 9 compares group attitudes towards redistribution and leaving the EU for all respondents and for Labour voters. Attitudes towards redistribution are measured on a 5-point scale from least to most supportive, which I recode as 1 if the respondent strongly agrees or agrees that the government should redistribute income, and 0 if the respondent neither agrees nor disagrees or disagrees or strongly disagrees. Support for leaving the EU is scored as respondents who stated that would vote to leave if a referendum was held.

Those who report that they don't know or would not vote (6.5% of respondents) are excluded.

Figure 9 shows similar patterns to those found more generally. New middle class voters look similar to working class voters on economic issues, both groups claiming more pro-redistribution attitudes than the traditional middle classes or self-employed workers, however the groups differ on the leaving the EU (all means are calculated using sampling weights but some caution is necessary in interpreting the absolute percentages). Labour voters are much less supportive of leaving the EU in all groups, but, even among Labour voters differences along class lines emerge. In a simple regression, controlling for age, gender, and region, the difference between new middle class and new working class and older working class voters was highly significant, with the new middle class voters have a predicted probability of voting to leave of 44% compared to 61% for the new working class and 57% for the traditional working classes.

Conclusion: Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Are there Solutions?

Is there a center-left agenda that attracts floating voters while also being able hold together its core base possible? While in any given electoral context the answer to this question may vary, Figure 1 suggests that on aggregate, the answer is yes. Despite all the above-mentioned challenges, left parties remain key players in European electoral politics, mobilizing large parts of the electorate. Indeed, many of the structural shifts outlined in this paper are as challenging for center-right parties. Many of these parties have lost previous voting blocs through economic change (e.g. as groups like teachers and doctors

have shifted to the left) and populist right parties threaten the in-roads they have made with the working class.

Yet, left parties face particular challenges. If current trends continue, left parties will increasingly rely on new middle class voters, and must address the question of how to build progressive platforms that address the long-standing goals of left parties in the labor market and broader society while maintaining middle class support. In this environment, left parties will need to navigate both conflicting demands among its base for culturally liberal policies (especially on immigration) and the pressures to veer economically left to address new vulnerability among parts of its base with the need to remain electorally viable and maintain middle class voters. The recent EU referendum in the UK shows how difficult this balancing act can become, particularly in contexts that are highly polarized around migration issues.

Figure 1: Vote Share in Parliamentary Elections 1960-2015

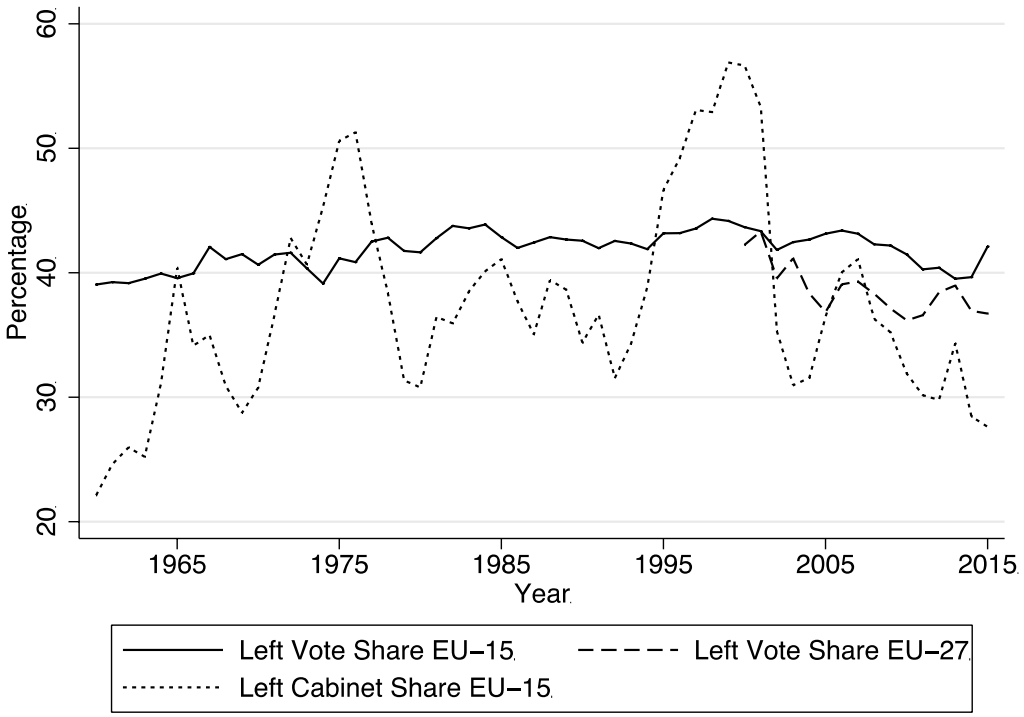


Figure 2: Support for Left Parties by Class Group

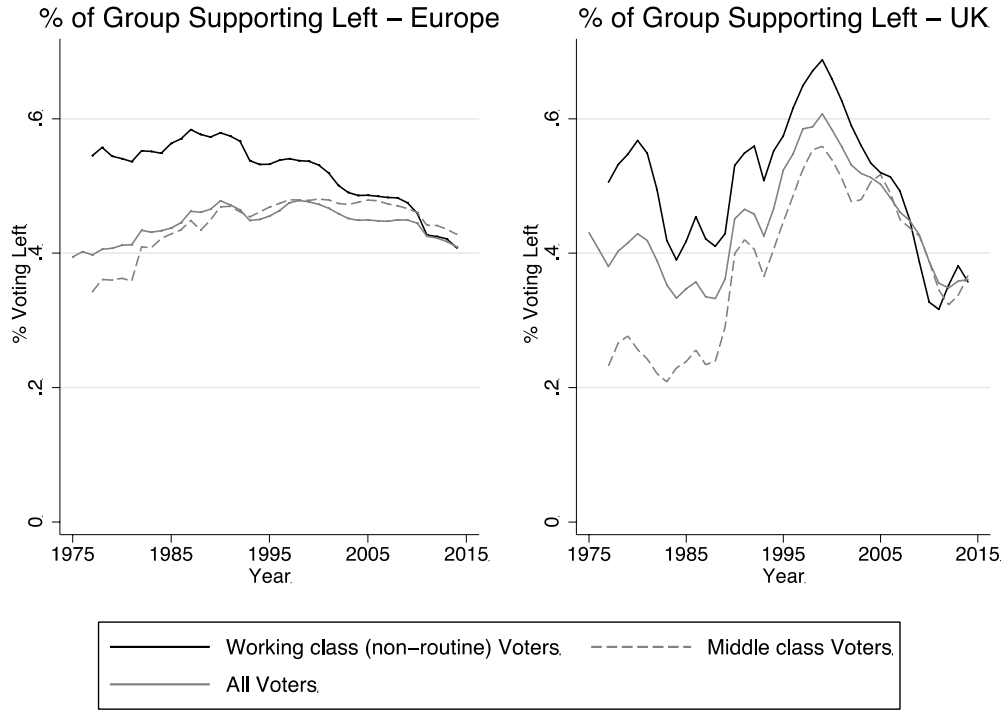


Figure 3: Left Base by Class Group

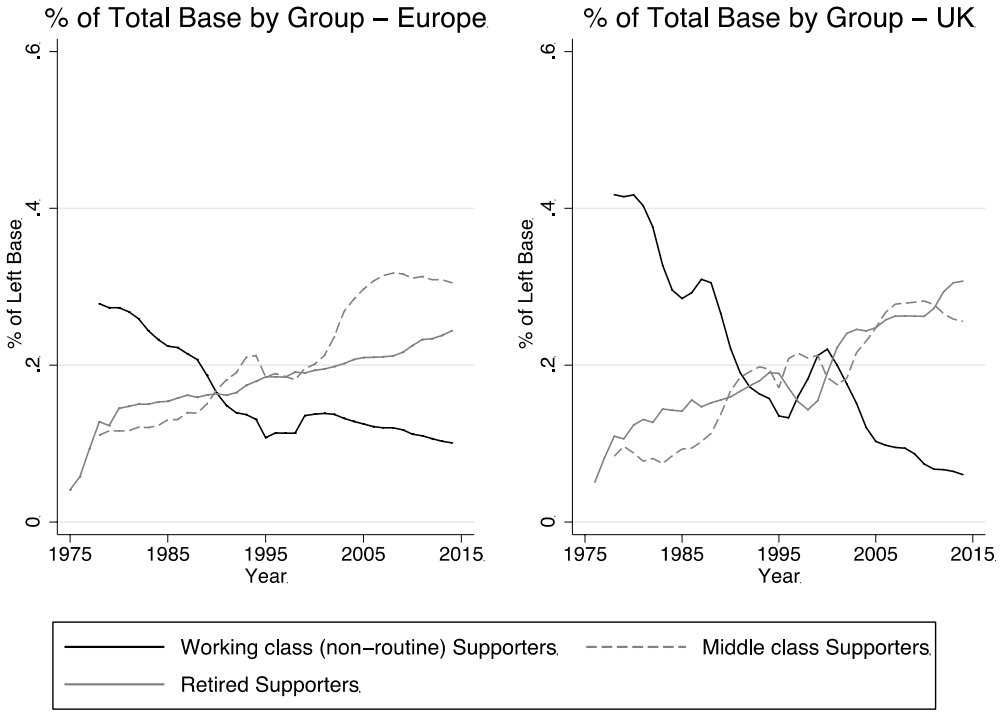


Figure 4: Percentage of Left Voters by Disaggregated Class Groups (2002-2014)

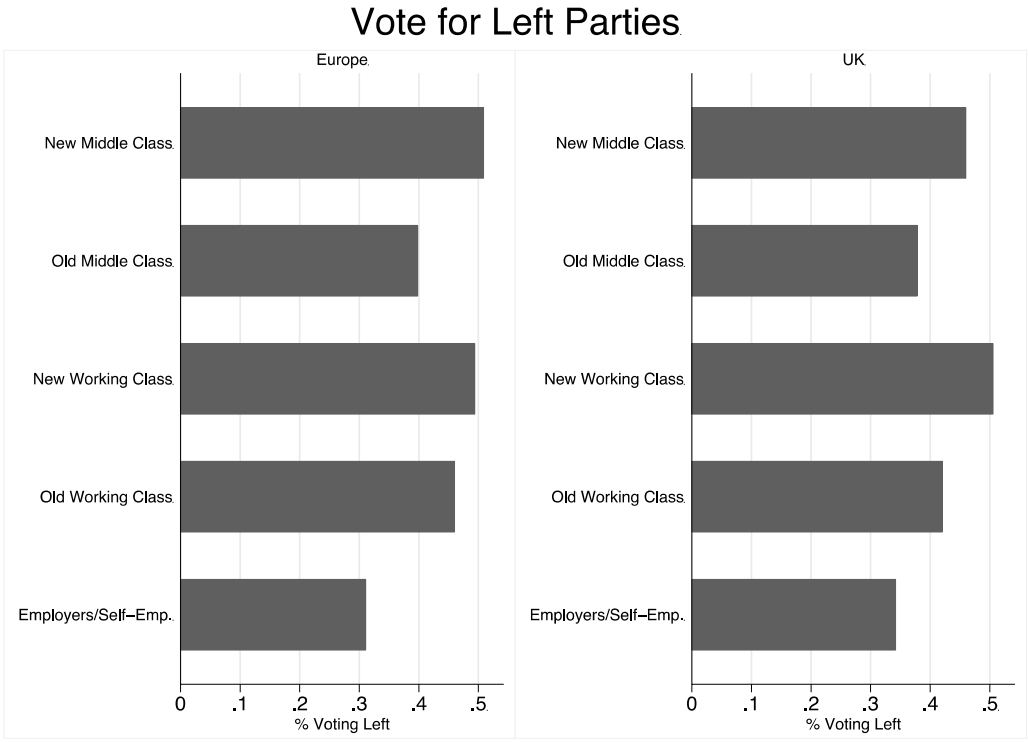


Figure 5: Percentage Support for Redistribution by Disaggregated Class Groups (2002-2014)

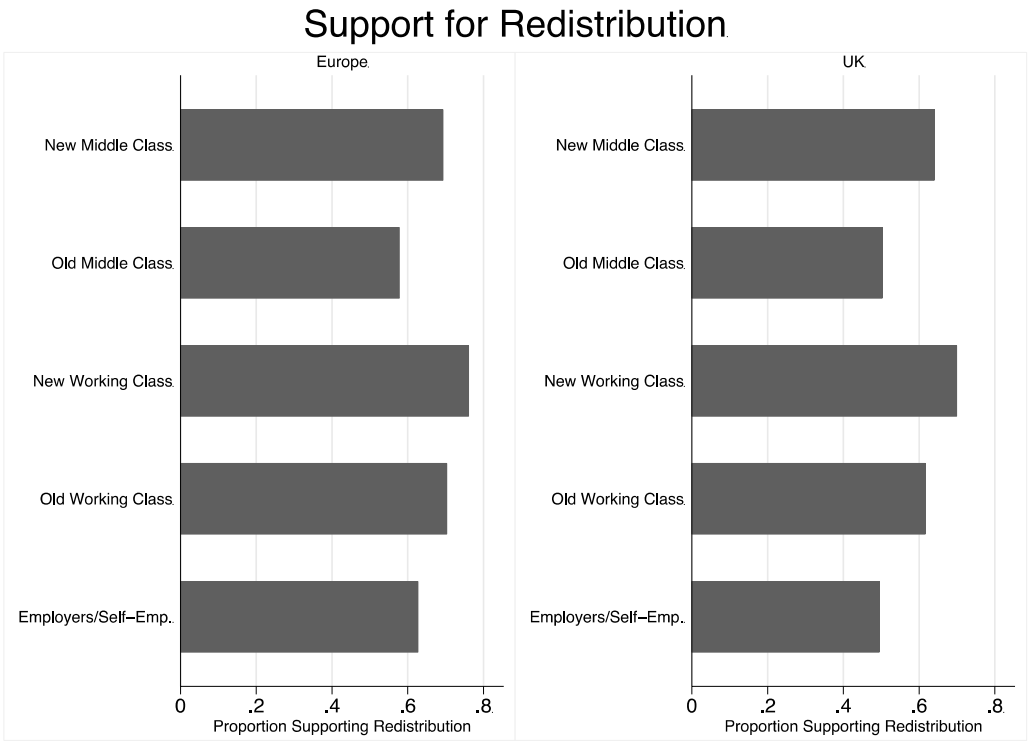


Figure 6: Percentage Support for Immigration as Good for Economy by Disaggregated Class Groups (2002-2014)

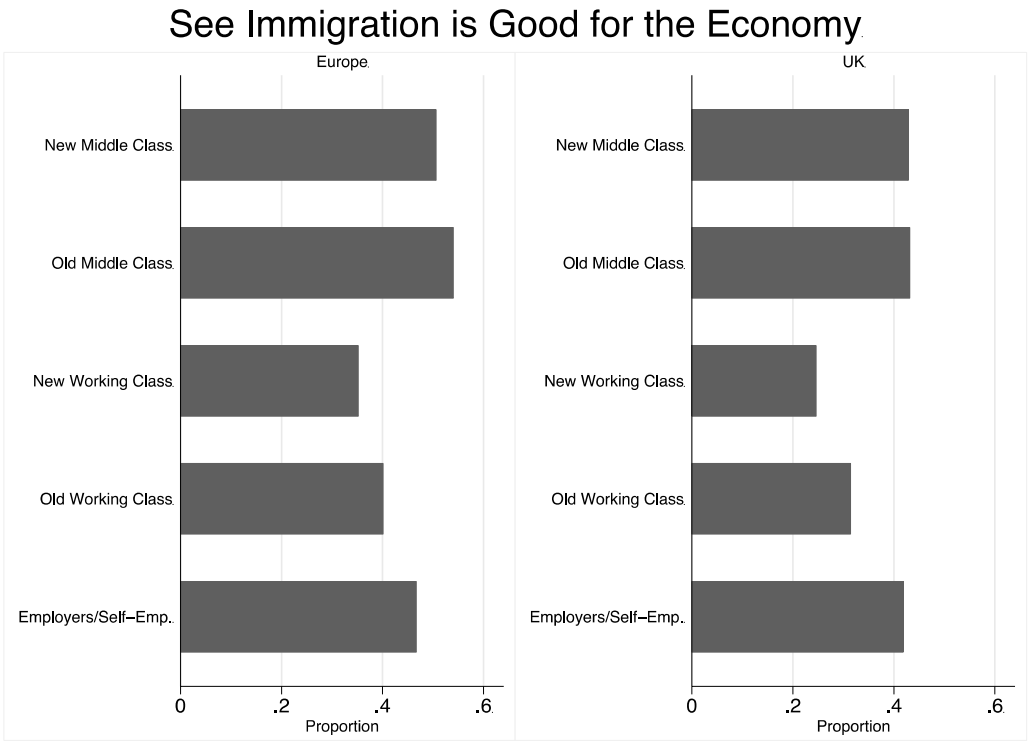


Figure 7: Vote for Range of Parties by Class Group

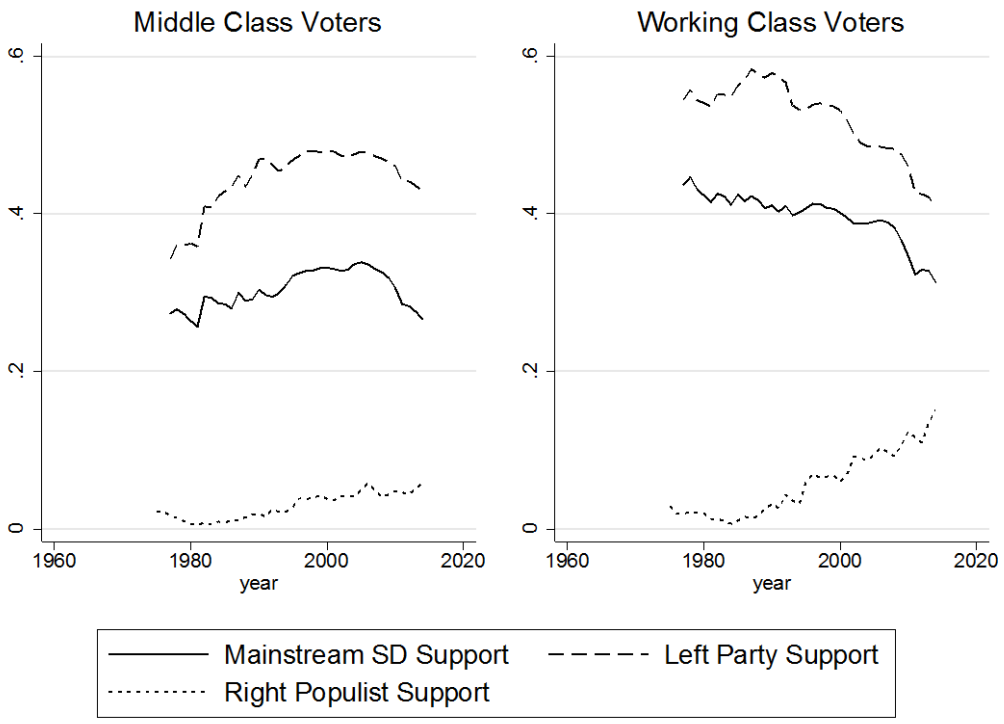


Figure 8: Labour Support, British Social Attitudes Survey

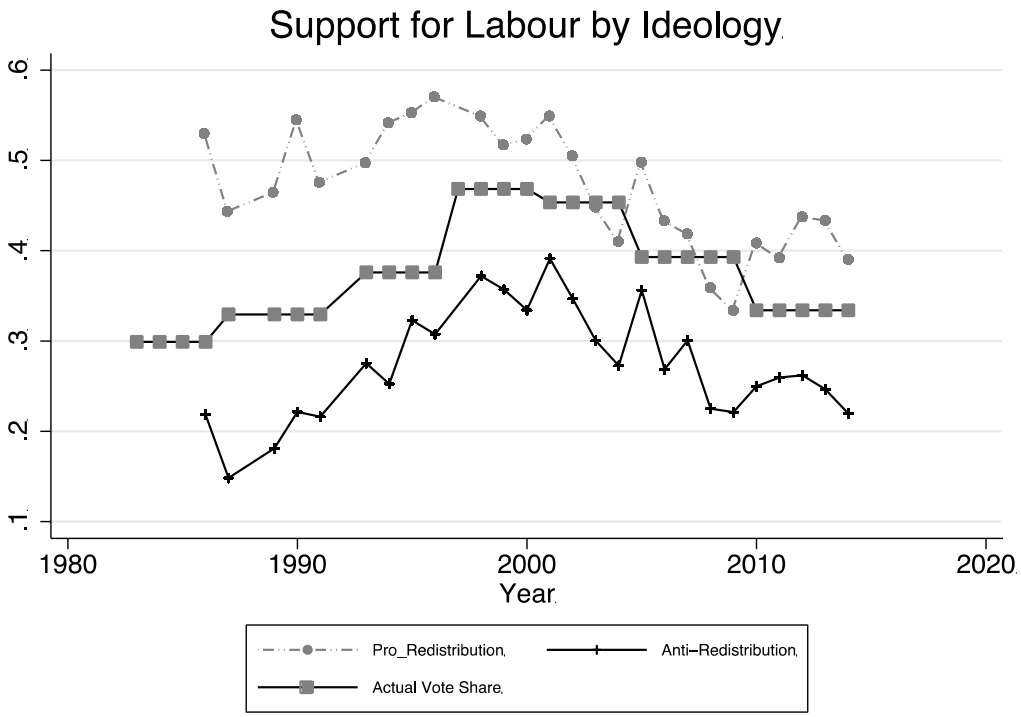
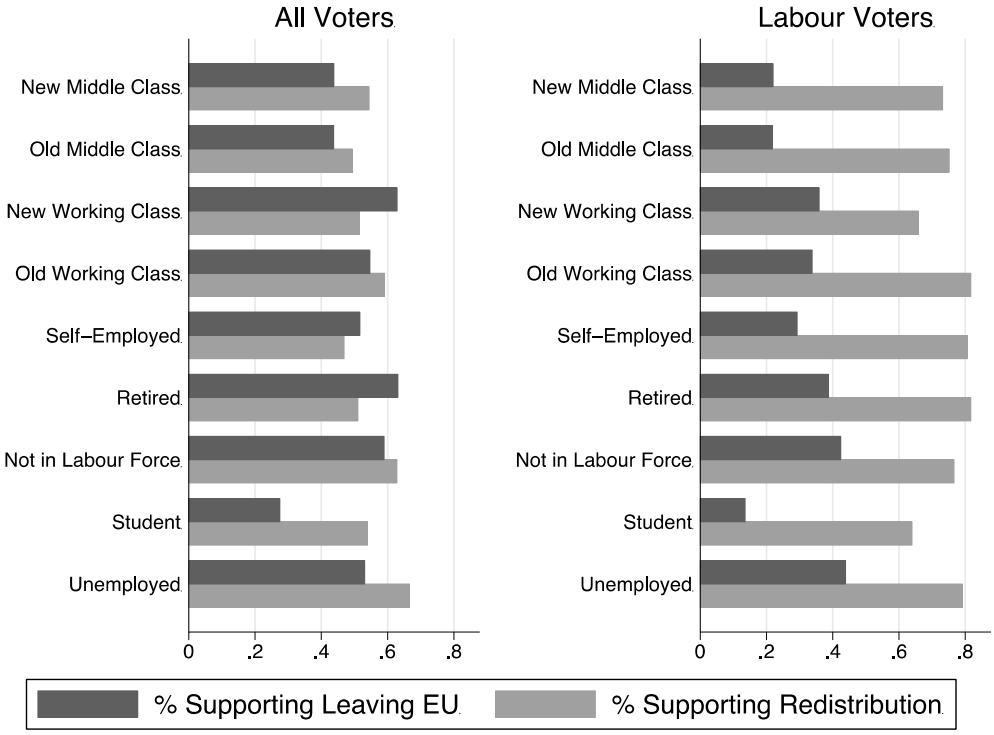


Figure 9: Support for leaving the EU



[i] In this paper, left parties are defined as mainstream Social Democrats, Communist, Left-Socialist and Green parties. A full coding of left parties is available on request. Vote shares from 1960-2013 come from Armingeon, Klaus, Romana Careja, David Weisstanner, Sarah Engler, Panajotis Potolidis and Marle`ne Gerber. 2012. "Comparative Political Data Set III 1990–2010." *Institute of Political Science, University of Berne* . Vote shares from 2014-2015 from the updated: Doring, Holger and Philip Manow. 2010. "Parliament and government composition database (ParlGov)." *An infrastructure for empirical information on parties, elections and governments in modern democracies. Version* 10(11):6.

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[viii] See: Häusermann, Silja and Hanspeter Kriesi. 2015. "What do voters want? Dimensions and configurations in individual-level preferences and party choice" in *The Politics of Advanced Capitalism*. Eds. Pablo Beramendi, Silja Häusermann, Herbert Kitschelt and Hanspeter Kriesi. Cambridge University Press. Kitschelt, Herbert and Philipp Rehm. 2014. "Occupations as a site of political preference formation." *Comparative Political Studies* 47(12):1670–1706. Kitschelt, Herbert et al. 1999. "European social democracy between political economy and electoral competition." *Continuity and change in contemporary capitalism* pp. 317–45.

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[x] These results are smoothed using a three-year moving average for presentational ease. From 1995 the European average includes Finland, Austria and Sweden.

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